STILL RUNNING ON EMPTY

BOOK III

Where Recovery Meets Structure, Identity, and the Body

FREE PREVIEW

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A free preview of the third book in the Still Running on Empty series — the complete book is available now on Gumroad.

About This Preview

This document contains the complete Introduction and the entire first chapter — “The Debt That Does Not Forgive” — from *Still Running on Empty, Book III: Where Recovery Meets Structure, Identity, and the Body*. It also includes a short guide to what each of the book’s nine chapters covers, and the complete crisis-resource list this book provides in Chapter 7 — reproduced here in full, regardless of whether you read anything else in this preview.

The complete book — all nine chapters, the afterword, the conclusion, and the verification appendix — is available now at Gumroad.

The Series So Far

- *Book I — Still Running on Empty: A Workbook for Neurodivergent Burnout* (2025). Free, at Zenodo.
- *Book II — Still Running on Empty: Expanded Edition* (2026). Eight clinical modules. Gumroad.
- *Book III — Still Running on Empty: Where Recovery Meets Structure, Identity, and the Body* (2026). Nine chapters on what the first two books still didn’t cover. This book. Gumroad.

Book III refers throughout to tools from the first two books — the Burnout Phase Identifier, the Masking Cost Calculator, the Stimulation Budget Tracker — without re-explaining them in full. It is written to be readable without them, but the original workbook remains the recommended place to start.

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If You Are in Crisis Right Now

You don't need to read anything else in this preview — or the complete book — first. This book says the same thing to its own readers: nothing else matters more right now than getting to real help. The resource list Book III provides in its seventh chapter is reproduced below in full, whether or not you ever read another page of this.

RESOURCES — FREE, REGARDLESS OF PURCHASE

- **United States** — call or text 988, or chat at 988lifeline.org, 24/7. Spanish-language support: press 2 after calling, or text AYUDA to 988.
- **United Kingdom and Ireland** — Samaritans, free, 24/7, on 116 123. Text SHOUT to 85258 for the Shout crisis text service, also 24/7.
- **Canada** — Talk Suicide Canada, 1-833-456-4566, 24/7, or text 45645 (4pm–midnight ET).
- **Australia** — Lifeline Australia, 24/7, at lifeline.org.au. Confirm the current phone number directly on their site.
- **Elsewhere, or if the above don't connect** — Find A Helpline (findahelpline.com) covers more than 175 countries. The International Association for Suicide Prevention also maintains a directory by country.
- **In immediate danger and can't reach a crisis line** — go to the nearest hospital emergency department.

Worried about someone else? These same services can advise you on how to help. You don't need to wait for an emergency to call.

These same resources appear in Chapter 7, "When Masking Costs Everything," alongside the research on why autistic and ADHD adults carry documented, elevated risk — and how to recognise it, in yourself or someone you love, without a checklist.

Introduction

What This Book Is, and Isn't

This is the third book in the Still Running on Empty series, following the original workbook (2025) and its Expanded Edition (2026). If you have not read either, this book will still be readable, but it assumes you have — it refers constantly to tools from both (the Burnout Phase Identifier, the Masking Cost Calculator, the Stimulation Budget Tracker, the Couple Demand Audit, and others), and it does not re-explain them in full. The original workbook remains the right place to start.

This book exists because of a question the author kept returning to after finishing the Expanded Edition: what did those two books still not cover? The answer turned out to be nine things, gathered here as nine chapters. They are not nine versions of the same kind of chapter. That is worth saying plainly before you start, because the workbook and its Expanded Edition trained you to expect a fairly consistent format — a tool, a worksheet, a clear next step. This book does not always give you that, and it would be dishonest to pretend otherwise.

Three Kinds of Chapters, Not One

Roughly speaking, eight of the nine chapters here do three different kinds of work — the ninth, Chapter 7, works differently again, and is described on its own below.

Some extend the original workbook's tools directly, with solid research behind them and a clear practical addition — Chapter 1 (recurring burnout), Chapter 2 (intersectionality), Chapter 5 (neurodivergent parents), Chapter 8 (substance use), and Chapter 9 (physical comorbidity) mostly work this way.

Some are more theoretical, drawing on critical theory or occupational psychology rather than autism-specific clinical research, and are honest about that different evidentiary footing — Chapter 4 (the structural and political dimension) and Chapter 6 (the trap of not being able to stop) work this way.

One chapter is essayistic rather than clinical, refuses the worksheet format on purpose, and sits closer to the author's published essays than to a workbook — that is Chapter 3, on identity beneath the mask. It does not resolve the question it raises, because the research it draws on has not resolved it either.

A fourth kind, on its own: Chapter 7 addresses suicide risk directly. It is placed where it is — after six other chapters, not first — because it draws on and refers back to the masking and burnout material those chapters build up. But its subject matter is urgent regardless of where it sits on a page, which is why the table of contents in this book, and this introduction, both tell you directly: you do not need to read this book in order to reach it.

A Reading Route, If You Want One

The paragraphs above already tell you the chapters aren't ordered by urgency or difficulty. If you'd rather have a more direct map than "skip to whatever speaks to you," here is one — offered as a starting point, not a diagnosis of what kind of reader you are. Most readers will find themselves in more than one group.

- **If you are in crisis right now** » go straight to Chapter 7's crisis resources section, near the end of that chapter. Nothing else in this book matters more right now than that.
- **If you want practical tools you can use this week** » Chapters 1, 2, 5, 8, and 9 each end with a concrete exercise and a clear next step.
- **If you want to understand the structural and economic forces behind burnout, not only your own response to it** » Chapters 4 and 6 are more theoretical, and reward slower reading.
- **If you're questioning who you are underneath years of masking** » Chapter 3 doesn't offer a worksheet, but it may be the chapter that matters most to you.

Preview note: the resources referenced in the first item above are reproduced in full earlier in this preview, under "If You Are in Crisis Right Now."

A Note on the Evidence Behind This Book

Every claim in this book that draws on outside research is marked by how solid that research actually is — established, reasoned extrapolation, or the author's own unvalidated hypothesis, using the same evidence-status boxes the Expanded Edition introduced. This book extends that practice further: every citation was checked against its original source during development, not simply carried over from wherever it was first found. Where a citation could not be confirmed, that is stated in the text, not hidden in a footnote. A handful of citation errors were caught and corrected during this process — including one meaningful mix-up

between a single study and the larger meta-analysis it belongs to, in Chapter 9. In this edition, each significant correction is disclosed as a short editorial note inside the chapter where it occurs, not only in the appendix, so it's visible to a reader working through that chapter rather than buried at the end of the book.

What This Book Assumes About You

It assumes you have burned out more than once, or expect you might. It assumes some of what exhausts you isn't fully explained by the five-phase model in the original workbook — an identity you can't locate under the mask, a body that won't cooperate with a recovery plan, a workplace that will still be there, unchanged, when you finish recovering. It does not assume you have a diagnosis. It does not assume any particular reader is at risk for the subject matter of Chapter 7 — but if you are, it wants you to be able to find that chapter immediately, not after reading eight others first.

How to Use This Book

The chapters are numbered in the order these nine topics were originally identified, not by evidence strength or genre — Chapter 3, the most essayistic chapter, sits early; Chapters 8 and 9, both well-evidenced and practical, sit late. Read in order if that appeals to you, or skip directly to whichever chapter's title speaks to what you're carrying right now. Nothing after this introduction requires you to have read what came before it, except Chapter 7, which draws on themes from Chapters 1 through 6 but does not require you to have read them to find its crisis resources section, which sits near the end of that chapter and can be reached in seconds.

A short "Where This Connects" note appears at the end of each of the nine chapters, pointing to one or two other chapters that bear on the same reader's situation. These are suggestions, not a required order — most readers carrying one of this book's subjects are also carrying at least one other.

Franco S. Raggio, 2026

CHAPTER ONE OF NINE

1

The Debt That Does Not Forgive

Cyclical and Cumulative Burnout

WHO THIS CHAPTER IS FOR

For readers who have been through burnout and recovery more than once, and who suspect — or already know — that each cycle has left them starting from a slightly lower place than the one before, rather than fully returning to where they started.

Especially relevant if your first episode happened in adolescence or early adulthood, well before any diagnosis, and you're only now able to name the pattern.

AUDIENCE: Readers with a history of multiple burnout episodes · Clinicians whose clients haven't resolved after a single recovery cycle.

Fabian

52 · ADHD, diagnosed at 48 · Fourth documented burnout episode

Fabian can date his first burnout to age nineteen, though he didn't have that word for it then. He called it "the year I dropped out." He returned to study, finished his degree, built a stable career. A second episode came at thirty-one. A third at forty-one, after a divorce. This one, his fourth, began at forty-nine — a year after his ADHD diagnosis finally explained a pattern he'd never been able to name.

The original workbook's Burnout Phase Identifier scored this episode as comparable in severity to his third. What the tool didn't capture — what he only saw by laying all four episodes side by side — was recovery time and recovery completeness. His first recovery took four months and felt total. His third took over a year and left him permanently unable to tolerate open-plan offices, a limit that wasn't there before and hasn't lifted since.

> Fabian's question, by his fourth episode, was no longer "how do I recover." It was: does each of these leave something behind that the last one didn't?

This chapter exists because the research says his instinct is right more often than not — and because the original workbook's tools, built to assess a single episode, were never designed to answer his real question.

What the Research Shows

Burnout recurrence turns out to be better documented than a single line in the Expanded Edition suggested. Arnold et al. (2023) surveyed 141 autistic adults; among those who answered a frequency question, only 18% said they experienced burnout less than once a year — for most, it was a recurring feature of life, not a one-time event. Mantzalas et al. (2022) found the same pattern qualitatively: onset typically in adolescence, a cycle that repeats across years or decades, usually unnamed until diagnosis arrives. A related survey cited in Ali et al. (2025) — the systematic review that anchors much of this book series — found that 46.2% of autistic participants had experienced burnout "four or more times." Fabian's four episodes put him in the largest single group, not an outlier.

Measurement research adds one more piece: Mantzalas et al. (2024), validating a new burnout severity measure, found it only moderately correlated (r=0.55) with an earlier one — a sign that even researchers are still working out how to measure this consistently. That's a caution about the field's tools, not about whether recurrence itself is real.

EVIDENCE AT A GLANCE

- **Established —** recurrence is common, typically begins in adolescence, and often predates diagnosis (Ali et al., 2025; Arnold et al., 2023; Mantzalas et al., 2022, 2024).
- **Extrapolation —** that each cycle leaves a permanently lower baseline, rather than simply repeating, is the author's clinical framework. No study measured baseline capacity across multiple cycles directly. The "debt that does not forgive" is a way of thinking about this, not a measured finding.

TRY THIS — THE CROSS-EPISODE LOG

Not a validated instrument — the author's own tool, built because nothing in the original workbook does this. Build one running record, separate from any single episode's Burnout Phase Identifier. One row per episode you can remember, going back as far as you reliably can. For each, note: approximate age or year; approximate trigger; how long recovery took; and what didn't fully come back afterward — a tolerance, a capacity, a relationship, an environment you could once handle and now can't.

The point isn't to grieve what's accumulated. It's to stop judging each new episode against the person you were before the first one — a comparison the research above suggests doesn't match how recovery actually works for most people with a multi-episode history.

Reflect

Take a few minutes with these before moving on. There's no right answer — the point is to notice, not to resolve. What is the earliest thing you can remember calling exhaustion, before you had any word for burnout? Looking at your own pattern: does each episode feel like a repeat, or does something feel different — smaller, harder to get back — each time? If you built a recovery plan around your most recent stable baseline instead of your earliest one, what would change about what you're asking of yourself right now?

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Recurrent burnout is well documented, not a personal failure to recover properly.
- It typically starts earlier than diagnosis, often in adolescence.
- The claim that recurrence permanently lowers baseline capacity is this book's own clinical framework — plausible, not yet directly measured.
- A cross-episode view catches what a single-episode assessment misses: what didn't come back.

THIS WEEK » Start the Cross-Episode Log with just two rows: your most recent episode, and the one before it. That's enough to see whether the pattern is worth tracking further.

EDITORIAL NOTE

An earlier draft of this chapter included a 12-month test–retest reliability statistic that could not be verified against any primary source; it was removed rather than left in place unverified. A separate draft also added a "9.2% reported burnout exactly twice" figure alongside the 46.2% recurrence statistic; that added figure could not be confirmed against the Mantzalas et al. (2024) source it was attributed to and has been removed for the same reason. The cross-episode framework above remains the author's own clinical model, not a peer-reviewed finding, as noted throughout.

WHERE THIS CONNECTS

The "debt that does not forgive" described here doesn't stay confined to energy and mood. If you've cycled through burnout multiple times and also live with chronic pain, joint hypermobility, or another physical condition, Chapter 9 picks up a thread this chapter leaves open: whether each cycle also leaves a physical residue, not just an emotional one. Read them together if that pattern sounds familiar.

SOURCES CITED IN THIS CHAPTER

Ali, D., Bougoure, M., Cooper, B., Quinton, A. M. G., Tan, D., Brett, J., Mandy, W., Maybery, M., Magiati, I., & Happé, F. (2025). Burnout as experienced by autistic people: A systematic review. *Clinical Psychology Review*, 122, 102669.

Arnold, S. R. C., Higgins, J. M., Weise, J., Desai, A., Pellicano, E., & Trollor, J. N. (2023). Towards the measurement of autistic burnout. *Autism*, 27(7). N=141.

Mantzalas, J., Richdale, A. L., Adikari, A., Lowe, J., & Dissanayake, C. (2022). What Is Autistic Burnout? A Thematic Analysis of Posts on Two Online Platforms. *Autism in Adulthood*, 4(1), 52–65.

Mantzalas, J., Richdale, A. L., Li, X., & Dissanayake, C. (2024). Measuring and validating autistic burnout. *Autism Research*, 17(7), 1417–1449. N=238, ages 18–75; the study's own abstract reports that 46% of participants had experienced burnout four or more times. The 46.2% figure (N=248) cited above, attributed to a related survey within Ali et al. (2025), is close but not identical to this primary source's own N and percentage. This discrepancy was not resolved during research and should be checked against original sources before further use.

IN THE COMPLETE BOOK

Chapters 2 through 9 continue in the same voice: a real vignette, a clear-eyed account of what the research actually shows and doesn't, a tool you can start this week, and a "Where This Connects" note pointing to whichever other chapter bears on the same situation. The guide that follows shows what each one covers.

Where to Start

A guide by chapter

Not every chapter will speak to every reader. This is a map, condensed from each chapter's own opening "Who This Chapter Is For" — so you can see what you'd actually be reading before you decide whether to buy it.

CHAPTER	WHO IT'S FOR
1 — The Debt That Does Not Forgive	Readers who've been through burnout and recovery more than once, and suspect each cycle starts from a lower place than the last. (Full chapter included above.)
2 — Bodies That Are Not Seen	LGBTQIA+ neurodivergent adults, and Black and Hispanic neurodivergent adults, whose burnout is compounded by diagnostic delay, diagnostic bias, or masking more than one identity at once.
3 — The Mask That Was Also Me	Anyone who tried to "unmask" and found not a truer self underneath, but very little there at all. The one chapter in this book that deliberately isn't a worksheet.
4 — Why Self-Care Is Not Enough	Readers who did everything the workbook asked, went back to the same environment, and watched the same burnout start again on schedule.
5 — The Invisible Caregivers	Neurodivergent parents — partnered, single, or raising a neurodivergent child — whose caregiving load feels disproportionately exhausting even when the hours are split evenly.

CHAPTER	WHO IT'S FOR
6 — The Trap of Not Being Able to Stop	Readers who know, intellectually, that they need to stop or reduce demand, and can't, because stopping costs something that feels as dangerous as the burnout itself.
7 — When Masking Costs Everything	Every reader, honestly — risk factors and protective factors specific to autistic and ADHD adults, and where to direct someone, including yourself, toward real help. (Crisis resources reproduced in full earlier in this preview.)
8 — What Gets Turned Off to Survive	Readers who use alcohol, cannabis, or other substances to get through masking-heavy days or come down from overload — a harm-reduction chapter, not a moralising one.
9 — The Body That Also Runs Out	Readers whose burnout comes with chronic pain, joint problems, digestive issues, or autoimmune conditions, and who've wondered if it's connected.
Afterword	Readers whose family structure, concept of disability, or access to healthcare doesn't match the Western, English-language research base most of this book — like most of the field — draws on.

Get the Complete Book III

This preview is the Introduction and Chapter 1. The complete book adds:

- Chapters 2 through 9 in full — intersectionality, identity beneath the mask, the structural and political dimension of burnout, neurodivergent parenting, the recovery paradox, suicide risk and protective factors, substance use, and physical comorbidity.
- An afterword on adapting these tools beyond a Western context.
- A conclusion that names what the book didn't resolve, honestly, instead of pretending it did.
- A verification appendix — every citation checked against its primary source, every correction disclosed.

AVAILABLE NOW

Get the complete book at:

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Book I, the original workbook, remains free at Zenodo — search “Still Running on Empty” by Franco S. Raggio. Book II, the Expanded Edition, is also available at Gumroad.

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Franco S. Raggio, 2026